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SUMMARY

WITHOUT FIRM GROUND

A THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE BOOK OF JOB AND GENESIS 1-4 FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EVIL IN CREATION

The research question is: what is God's responsibility for the evil in the world? I ask this question against the background of the traditional interpretation of Genesis 1-4. According to this interpretation these chapters are read as the story of creation, fall and salvation. Before Genesis 1-4 I read the book of Job. By this I try to gain more insight in the way the Old Testament itself speaks about God in relation to suffering and evil. So we get the necessary distance to read Genesis 1-4 with a fresh look. This is necessary because of the important place of Genesis 1-4 in theology.

The story of the book of Job starts, after the introduction of Job, with a conversation in heaven between the Lord and someone named 'the adversary'. The adversary is convinced that Job only fears the Lord because he blesses and protects him on all sides. Job's godliness is not without ground. When God takes everything away from Job, he will turn against God. By the adversary's suspicion God gets in a tight place with regard to Job's godliness.

The question whether Job fears the Lord without ground has not been answered at the end of the prologue. The whole story this question is present in the background. There it is not only the question of Job's godliness but it also becomes a question with regard to God's position. Instead of saying God farewell or praising God Job chooses a third road: he holds fast his integrity and this means that he is going to confront God. He rebels. That is the way of a righteous man.

According to Elifaz and his friends Job suffers because he has sinned. This is not a denial of Job's righteousness, because God, who finds fault even with his angels, certainly finds fault with human beings. Man is weak. Therefore the right attitude for Job is to show remorse and to commit himself to God. God will show mercy upon him. But if he stubbornly resists, he goes the way of the wicked. Again and again the friends describe the fate of the wicked as a warning for Job.

For Job's friends it is clear why he has to suffer. Traditional wisdom is enough for them. There is much more tension in Job's words about God. Because his friends continually accuse him, he feels pressed to defend himself. Therefore Job has to address God and appear before God; there is no judge above God.

The speeches between Job and his friends conclude with the speeches of Job. In the first Job looks back on his conversation with his friends and he tries to find a ground to address God. He finds this ground in the word of God himself. Man cannot find or reach wisdom, but God has told man what wisdom is: to fear the Lord and to turn from evil. According to this wisdom Job has lived his life. Then Job holds his final plea.

God's answer is long in coming. First a young man, who has not spoken out of respect for the older men, addresses Job. His words prepare us for God's speeches.

After this God himself speaks. He shows Job that he is no party for him, because God is wiser and more powerful than Job. Job does not know the answer to God's questions and so he has to realise that a lawsuit against God is fruitless. Job does not have enough wisdom and cannot force God to answer his lawsuit, because he is weak and not God. God is stronger and decides what is right.

It fits the prologue that God overpowers Job with his might. We are still waiting for the answer on the question whether Job fears the Lord without ground. Therefore the Lord cannot tell Job the reason why he had to suffer.

Job acknowledges God's power. God can do whatever he wants. Job cannot stop him and he misses the wisdom to understand. What Job expected has happened. God has appeared and has overpowered him, but Job has seen God with his own eyes, something the friends never expected to happen. Job has been vindicated. After this he gives up the fight.

In the epilogue God confirms that Job has spoken right of him, as opposed to Elifaz and his friends. This concerns all Job's words, even the rebellious ones. In Job's case rebellion was indeed the way of the righteous. After this the Lord gives all double back to Job. So he acknowledges that Job has been wronged.

Job's friends defended God's righteousness. According to them God does not do any injustice. Evil is always the consequence of human sin. Their position is similar to the traditional interpretation of the beginning of Genesis, according to which God created a perfect creation free from evil. But when man sinned evil came into the world. Evil and suffering are consequences of the Fall and thus of man's sin. After Job this argument is no longer evident.

When God creates he shows first his sovereignty and power. He controls the water and the darkness that fill the earth in Genesis 1:2. He sets boundaries and separates. Only God can do this. So he makes an inhabitable world, but this world cannot exist without God's power and wisdom. The darkness and the water of verse 2 get a place in the world because of God's power and wisdom.

Genesis 1 does not want to describe a world free from all evil, but a creation that shows God's sovereignty and one that is good for men and animals to inhabit. Therefore everything gets its place and therefore God regulates the food for men and animals sharing the same space. God creates a world full of peace and righteousness. In the traditional interpretation of Genesis 1 of man's creation in the image of God means that man originally was righteous and holy. With the Fall man lost his perfection, but in Christ God's image has been restored in man. This interpretation does not fit Genesis 1. God's image does not concern man's being but his function, his place in creation and his dignity. A comparison with idiom in the ancient Near East shows that creation of man in the image of God belongs to the ideology of the king. Special for Genesis 1 is that this idiom is not used for the king but for all human beings. Therefore in Genesis 9:6 this idiom can be used in the context of the prohibition to kill another human being.

God tells man to rule over the animals and to take in possession the earth. In Genesis 1 this is not viewed as a violent activity. It is part of God's blessing. Creation is ready to be inhabited by man. It is a rich and peaceful world.

Genesis 2-4 belong together. In Genesis 5:1 begins a new part. Genesis 4 shares a few themes with Genesis 3. God plants a garden. This garden reminds of a garden of the gods. Here he places man. He has made man out of dust of the earth. Man is dust and therefore weak and vulnerable.

Wisdom is an important theme in Genesis 2-3. By the two trees two kinds of wisdom are set next to each other: a wisdom that belongs to obedience to God and a wisdom that man acquires himself. Man is forbidden to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

In Genesis 3 the snake is introduced as one of the animals that God has made. He is the most cunning animal. There is a wordplay between cunning and naked in 2:25. In 2:25 man and his wife are naked but they were not ashamed. After man and his wife has eaten from the tree of knowledge the reason they were not ashamed becomes clear: their eyes were not open and they did not have knowledge. Nakedness is not a sign of innocence, but a sign of limited knowledge. They are like children that do not have knowledge of good and evil to make the right choices. Man and his wife depend on God and have to trust God to know what is good. They are not capable of choosing good and rejecting evil. When it comes to wisdom they are no party for the snake. The snake undermines their trust in God.

God's punishment is limited and is concentrated on something that belongs to the man and his wife. With the punishment there also is mercy. The snake will have the worst of it, but there will also be enmity. The life of man and his wife will be full of trouble.

In Genesis 4 Cain is the man that tills the ground as his father was. God does not accept Cain's offerings. No explanation is given. The story is not about God's reason to reject Cain's offerings. It is the story of Cain's reaction on this rejection. God calls on him to resist sin, but Cain does not answer God and murders his brother.

In Genesis 3 and 4 God puts man in a position where he must choose what is right and to listen to God's words. Both times man fails.

Looking back to the book of Job and Genesis 1-4 we see that God is not irreproachable with regard to evil. In the conversation with the adversary God is put in a tight place. If he refuses to take away Job's riches and health the suspicion would endure. In the dialogues Job tries to get God in a tight place with his lawsuit. God's words to Elifaz in 42:7 show that Job has spoken the truth.

The friends want to defend God. To do this they have to speak lies about God and Job. The traditional view of creation and fall can lead to a one-sided interpretation of Genesis 1-4. In this view God is perfect and everything he does is perfect. But God is greater than a God for us. Creation is greater than a creation that is good for man.

In the book of Job and Genesis wisdom plays an important role. In both texts man has only little wisdom and he understands few things. He depends on God's word. This lack of knowledge is not used as a defence for God. There is not a hidden know-

ledge for man that would explain evil if man had access to this knowledge. There is not a principle outside God. God only determines what is good and right.

In the question of God's responsibility for evil, responsibility can have two meanings: is God the cause of evil and can God be held accountable for evil? The cause of Job's suffering is clear: the conversation of the Lord and the adversary. In Genesis the cause for evil is less clear. What we do see there is that God puts man in situations that are dangerous and where things can go wrong. Job calls God to account for his suffering. This is for him the right way. Part of this is that Job addresses God. Only by addressing God can Job go forward.

In Job and Genesis God and man must deal with suspicion. In Job everything starts with the suspicion of his godliness. In Genesis the snake sows distrust with regard to God's words. This suspicion can only be overcome by addressing the other. There is no external ground. Only by addressing the other can ground be found in the other.